

AI XIAOMING

WUHAN DIARY

The documentary maker and gender-studies scholar Ai Xiaoming went back to her hometown of Wuhan in January 2020 to spend the Lunar New Year holiday with her elderly father. During the coronavirus lockdown she posted a series of diary entries on the Matters website, in the form of audio clips, photographs, poems and prose, as well as the script for a play composed entirely of telephone messages, illustrated by a photo of high-rise apartment blocks. Here we publish an excerpt from the first entry.¹

I RETURNED TO WUHAN from Guangzhou on January 16th. By that time, I had heard about a viral cold—or something—but shrugged it off, thinking that it was winter after all, and no winter passes without viral colds. On the 17th, I had to find a new carer for my elderly father, because the person who had been looking after him was going back to her hometown. On the 17th and the 18th, I made several trips to the hospital to inquire about this, but didn't notice anything unusual. Had I known the grave situation at the time, I probably wouldn't have dared go.

On January 19th, a friend came for dinner. She told me what she had heard about the spread of pneumonia in Hankou.² She showed me some pictures, saying that some medical staff had been infected, and that patients had been admitted to Intensive Care Units, where the daily cost of saving a life was very high. By then I still didn't take it seriously. January 20th was a turning point, when all of a sudden the coronavirus took hold. Three days later, the city was locked down—three days of immense upheaval.

Traffic at Wuhan Railway Station has come to a halt. Residents are being engulfed in an avalanche of information on a daily basis. The epidemic has suddenly become frightful, shocking and confusing. Like everyone else, I rushed to the pharmacy to buy the most basic care and hygiene products for my father—cotton swabs, glycerine enema, disinfectants, rubbing alcohol and so on; prescribed medicines were still only available at the hospital. I managed to get a few bottles of disinfectant, but rubbing alcohol was only available in small bottles of 100ml. There were no 500ml bottles left. Some pharmacies had run out of masks. Those who still stocked them had raised the price from 12 to 16 yuan. Even a normal cotton mask cost 16 yuan now. Surgical masks were not available at all. I was learning that the N95 masks came in many different types.³

I cleaned the house with disinfectant. With just two days to go before the Lunar New Year, it hit me that gatherings and dinner parties would no longer be possible. The rumours were beginning to sound scary. From the lockdown on the 23rd to New Year's Day on the 25th, the year began in such a strange way that I felt disoriented. I thought about the risk I'd taken in having hired the carer from the hospital without any awareness of the epidemic—and what risks we would be running if, say, she had been infected. The whole thing was a muddle.

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On January 29th, I accompanied a team of volunteers. With fifteen cars, the team delivered 6,500 sets of personal protective equipment (PPES) to 21 hospitals and institutions. There were between ten and twenty people in the coordinating group, checking updates on social media all the time, even when they were eating. One of them announced that he had just got hold of 2,000 sets of PPES: immediately they were ordered and paid for, with 80,000 yuan in donations. Volunteers on the ground in

¹ Ai Xiaoming's diary entries are posted at matters.news/@tianguowawa. For a discussion of her earlier work, see the interview with her, 'The Citizen Camera', NLR 72, Nov–Dec 2011. Footnotes by NLR.

² The metropolitan area of Wuhan comprises three cities, spanning the confluence of the Han and Yangtze rivers: Hankou lies on the north bank of the Yangtze, Wuchang on its south bank; Hanyang lies on the south bank of the Han.

³ N95 masks: surgical-type masks, said to stop 95 per cent of particles in the air. Exchange rate: approx. 7 yuan=\$1.

Wuhan would be responsible for receiving the PPEs and getting in touch with hospitals. If the hospital were not able to send someone to collect the PPEs, the volunteers would deliver them themselves.

One of the volunteers was a graduate of Fudan University, part of a chat group of over 400 Fudan graduates living in Wuhan. When they heard the news before the New Year, they decided to do something and started to contact each other. They collected donations of over 600,000 yuan; many hospitals had been appealing to the public for donations. The Fudan graduates mobilized their network of contacts to search for emergency equipment. When someone learned that a county-level non-woven fabric supplier still stocked PPEs, they drove there and bought the PPEs with cash before transporting them to Wuhan. Other volunteers would then send these donations to hospitals according to the requests of the donors. For example, if I were a graduate of the University of Hong Kong and I happened to know a fellow graduate who worked for a hospital that was running out of equipment, I could request that my donation be sent to that specific hospital. The volunteers on the ground would transport the equipment to the hospital.

Actually, they didn't want me to come along. I volunteered because I wanted to take a look at the situation on the ground, and I felt that I should do something to contribute as well. But the youngsters passing by all said to me, 'Excuse me, granny.' I'd need to put on one of those white gowns to be taken seriously.

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Filming and interviewing will be difficult, because I have a responsibility to my family and community as well. I wait until I'm outside our compound before putting on my PPE, and at the end of the day I take it off before I re-enter the compound. It's better not to cause panic among the neighbours. If people around you know that you've been to the hospital that treats infectious diseases, everyone will worry that you could have brought the virus back. But now the hospitals have begun appealing for help, who will respond if no-one comes forward? It's not easy to volunteer at the moment, as the government has asked everyone to stay put. The volunteers are mainly young people, who might be discouraged by their parents' worrying about their safety. Volunteer teams are

relatively small and flexible, capable of delivering tens of thousands of sets of protective clothing to the front line. They are playing a vital role in responding to urgent requests.

Yesterday I heard that doctors and nurses in some hospitals would no longer be able to inspect the wards because they were running out of protective equipment. Today we went to deliver PPEs to hospitals. There were 25 PPEs in each box and we delivered 20 boxes, so 500 PPEs. One set of equipment was given to a volunteer who had no protective clothing at all, though the hospitals we were visiting were all treating patients with severe symptoms. We also delivered two boxes to a community centre.

Our first delivery was to a city-level hospital. An administrator came out to check the PPEs and accepted them. When we got to the community centre, the young woman at the reception told us that there were over thirty members of staff there who hadn't taken any leave since New Year's Eve. They only had fifty PPEs left. We gave them another fifty. The young woman who signed the receipt had no protective clothing, only a mask. She said the protective equipment was reserved for doctors and nurses who had to work in the wards. The PPE sets would be irradiated with ultraviolet rays and then re-used. This was devastating to hear.

We are running short of alcohol and masks. At the end of each day, I wash my PPE set in the washing machine, spray it with disinfectant and dry it on the radiator. Before wearing it again, I spray it with alcohol. I ran out of alcohol and had to go to the pharmacy today to buy another two bottles—the maximum amount allowed under the ration. We cannot, and will not, ask for a new PPE, because those who work in the hospitals need them too. Masks are also out of stock. The N95 masks, even the ones used for protection against dust instead of virus, were unavailable. When the pharmacies are re-stocked, they sell out fast. When we go out, we usually wear a disposable mask outside an N95. I boil my N95 mask in an electric kettle and dry it on the radiator—someone said that high temperatures kill the virus. The cost is also a concern: an N95 costs 25 yuan, which would amount to 750 yuan a month. Even if you can protect yourself from the virus, you have to live with others who don't have the masks. I know it's laughable to wash disposable masks, but there is no alternative.

How did the hospitals reach the point where they have to keep appealing to the public for help? We're witnessing the hollowing out of social

management. It is incredible that we have such high public expenditure and abundant global-supply chains, yet our hospitals have run out of masks and PPEs and have to appeal for help. This really puzzles me. I would find it more comprehensible if there were not enough ventilators, laboratories or a cure for the virus; but how can hospitals not be equipped with enough masks, protective clothing and disinfectant, to the point that they are not able to cope with an epidemic? I can barely believe that our public healthcare system could be so vulnerable and fragile; that our medical resources are so scarce is beyond my imagination. In such circumstances, how can public life and safety be guaranteed?

If the lockdown continues, there may be more difficulties ahead, as resources become scarcer and scarcer. Daily life will be affected. Supplying medicines for the elderly will become a problem, and no-one knows whether hospitals can still provide prescriptions. If masks run out and goods are not circulating, then life ahead will be difficult to imagine.

We have run out of cat food and the online order has not arrived. All we can do for now is maintain a fragile balance.

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Panic is leading to problems and crises more horrendous than the epidemic itself, because it is resulting in isolation between individuals and aggravated selfishness, arising rapidly and on a massive scale. We have seen meanness, self-protection and treating neighbours as enemies. This barbaric behaviour triggered by panic amounts to a humanitarian crisis, which is a more harmful virus.

The initial strict control of information made the spread of the virus inevitable. Many of the measures taken afterwards were not subject to sufficient public debate, but were imposed as a sudden shutdown. Government policy moved from telling the public about the epidemic to the lockdown of the city, with restrictions on movement and the suspension of all public transport—which, mixed with misinformation, has caused high levels of panic. Extreme panic has provoked extreme social responses. One instance of this is growing isolation, between individuals, between provinces and between villages. This behaviour then gets reproduced. Slogans such as ‘Entering the village equals slaughtering the villagers’ reinforce the hysterical assumption that the epidemic equals death and that isolation equals survival.

Yesterday we saw on the news that after a father was put in isolation, his eldest son, who suffered from cerebral palsy, was left alone at home and died a few days later. The younger son, who was not infected, was isolated together with the father and other patients. The death of the 17-year-old boy was a metaphor, alerting us to the sort of tragedy that can occur under this extreme isolation. How could we have left a child with cerebral palsy all alone and unattended? If the city and the people of Wuhan are isolated beyond a certain point, each one of us may end up like this boy. We are simply abandoned, forced into a desperate situation of extreme despair, with nowhere to escape and no-one to help us. Of course, in theory, it may not come to that point, but the boy's desperation is a warning.

We need to ask ourselves about the root causes of this behaviour—of abandoning others, and even inciting hatred. How can we have become so cruel, inhuman and barbaric? It seems that when we are confronted with this epidemic, we lose the capacity for rational analysis and thinking, resorting to methods that are primitive, uncivilized and inhumane. How did we get here? Coronavirus has allowed us to see the frailty of our social psychology, the flaws in our social management and in political institutions governed without freedom of speech and freedom of press. This cannot guarantee public safety. The coronavirus has laid bare the problems of the system, and we need to find a way to tackle them.

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I was born in Wuhan and feel deeply attached to the city. But there are moments when I've thought to myself, 'Those who have cursed Wuhan, who have blocked Wuhan residents from going home, who have bullied us, you'd better stay away from our cherry blossoms when the epidemic is over, and no-one will ever serve you hot dry noodles.' Of course, it's just a joke.

Wuhan is a city with a long history, known as the 'Thoroughfare to Nine Provinces'. It witnessed the first uprising in the 1911 Revolution. It was also a mainstay during the Sino-Japanese War. After Nanjing fell, the National Government moved to Wuhan, where they directed a major air battle. All military operations were commanded from the basement of the Library of Hubei Province. The National Government stayed here for a year before moving to Chongqing in 1938. A large number of

intellectuals stayed on for a long time during the War. Wuhan has stunning scenery, and the Yangtze River is very beautiful.

The volunteers all have a deep affection for Wuhan. We live here and our life experiences are intertwined with the city. None of us can bear to see the fall of the city before the onslaught of the epidemic. Nor can we tolerate the overwhelming insults thrown at us, when people say ‘You Wuhan people should pay the price’, or ‘You should not come outside to harm others’. Some media reports made it sound like you would catch ‘Wuhan pneumonia’ if you had been to Wuhan or had seen a Wuhanese. Not to mention the violent acts of chasing and besieging Wuhan people. To equate the virus with Wuhanese is stigma and a violation of the dignity of the people in this city.

Not long ago, Wuhan spent hundreds of billions hosting the military games. Much of the infrastructure has been improved, yet it’s hard to digest the fact that a city that could afford to spend so much money hosting such a spectacle has not equipped its hospitals with enough PPEs. The contrast is simply too stark.

On a positive note, I’ve been really moved by the young volunteers. They are ordinary people who have stepped forward, making an effort to save a city on the verge of collapse. The young people have taken on the responsibilities voluntarily, sacrificing their own safety for the benefit of the public good. In so doing, they have also formed a link among themselves based on shared values. In this regard, I think this is also an opportunity for new social forces to grow.

Wuhan, 1 February 2020